

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 19 Year A 2020

Knowing all that we know of what is going on in the world - all its troubles and crisis - we can easily be led to despair. Of course, and understandably so, forefront in our concerns is our current experience of Corona virus. It has dragged on much longer than we could have imagined. We have had setbacks. And the advice we are now receiving indicates there will be more of these setbacks. The end is not yet in sight. And this can lead – as it certainly has for me – to a certain heaviness of heart.

Amidst our own troubles, it's probably good to remind ourselves of something of the bigger picture. At the peak of various pandemic outbreaks, there have been some countries that have not allowed people out for even an hour a day. In some countries one person from a household was allowed to leave the house one day a week. Early in the pandemic in Wuhan, residents were confined to their homes or compounds. Residents were largely forbidden to leave even for food or medicine, which had to be delivered or organised through neighbourhood committees. When New Zealand moved to its stage 4 even bakeries, butchers and bottle shops were closed. During Spain's lockdown people weren't even allowed out for exercise and children were not permitted out for six weeks.

In the midst of our own troubles it is important to remember that what we experience *really* has impacted the entire human family. And what we currently suffer is not nearly the worst of what many others have – and are – enduring. It probably *doesn't* help to dwell too much on this, because it can compound the sense that we're drowning in chaos. And we can ask, "Where is God in all of this?"

But indeed, we *should be* asking, where is God in all of this! We need to think about this experience - of suffering, of isolation, of loneliness, of disruption, of illness, of death, of pestilence, of economic upheaval – spiritually and theologically. We *do* need to ask where is God in all of this. Because otherwise we will risk not finding any meaning in what we are experiencing. And any meaning that is proposed to us will be framed only in medical and economic terms. But surely it is a profoundly human issue and most certainly also a spiritual one.

In the Old Testament lesson today from the First Book of Kings we encounter Elijah the prophet. He comes to the scene we hear today in a state of despondency. The mood he brings to the story perhaps many of us know.... He is anxious, angry and maybe even a bit grumpy. Just prior to this episode he was so miserable that he is asking God to let him die. Elijah was fleeing for his life. Jezebel - the depraved wife of Ahab – and set out to kill the prophet following his victory over the false prophets of Baal. Memory of that God-given victory was short-lived.

And so Elijah cries out, *I have been zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.* And so in today's reading we find him hiding in a cave, seeking shelter in the rock face. But just as he finds shelter along comes an earthquake and then a storm that smashes the rocks and cliffs of the mountains, threatening to drown him in chaos.

We could imagine Elijah on the cliff face thinking, *This?! This as well?! I have come for escape, for quiet and now this! Where are you God in all of this?* But Elijah, however, couldn't move forward or begin to make sense of his situation – and of where God might be – until confronted with the voice of God revealed as a little whisper, the 'sound of sheer silence'. *'O still small voice of calm'*. The voice of God came to Elijah in the most unexpected of ways. And so it is with us. Allow ourselves to be swamped by the loud or the destructive we will hear nothing. But submit to the silence, to the small, still voice, then God can get a word in.

The Gospel today sees the disciples and Peter in similar circumstances. In a way they too are fleeing - the burden and busyness of ministering to the crowds - only to then be in an open boat in the middle of the Sea in a raging storm. *"Where is God in all of this?"* But in the storm, they see Jesus approach. Peter - with usual nervousness and doubt - speaks up, *Lord, if it's you tell me to come to you across the water.* Yes, he steps out, but when he notices the storm, *feels the force of the wind*, it says, he sinks. Like Peter (and Elijah) the tempests of these past months could certainly overwhelm us. The cultural earthquake of our times threatens us. We ask, *God, where are you?*

Now, as Christians, our solemn vocation is to proclaim the Good News. Harping on about all the problems of the world isn't a very attractive way to proclaim the Gospel. Part of the good news of God in Jesus Christ is that God offers us life and wholeness and hope. And confidence. And that's the point of today's readings. The Scriptures placed before us today remind us *we can* find confidence, even in the worst of storms, even in the most chaotic of times. You can go through the worst that life can throw at you if only you keep up your contact with God. *We can* make sense of the situations we find ourselves if we listen to the still voice; if we keep our sights fixed on Jesus; if we let Jesus come into the boat with us.

If we are to weather the storms with our faith intact, then we need to stay close to God. No prayer? Well, we'll find we lose our reserve of confidence. Not sharing in the life of the Church? Our confidence will run thin. Soon we'll take your eyes off Jesus, and just like Peter, we will sink. Yes, there are particular challenges around that at this time, but it's not impossible. It simply means we must be more intentional and more focused on ensuring it happens. Because otherwise soon we'll only be able to hear the screaming wind, the noise, and the deafening roar of the storms that shake the very foundations of our lives. And without the voice of God and the eyes of Jesus to hold us steady, we, like Peter, will either be blown away or drown.

Yes, in this time of trouble, when our hearts are heavy, when we face a still-yet uncertain future, when we are still separated from each other, we need to find some meaning in all this. Yes, we listen to medical advice. Yes, we accept the Prime Minister's and Premier's directives. But they *cannot* speak to matters of the heart. They cannot address our spiritual anguish. They cannot give us the real confidence we need. *We can* face the storms and troubles of life if we walk out and toward Jesus. Calm will come if we let Jesus into the boat! And what has been the experience of faithful men and women down through all the centuries – who have experienced far worse and far more destructive storms than we face – is that giving Christ our confidence and being faithful to him *will see us through*. The real question, is not “Is God absent from us.” Rather the real question is, “Are we absent from God?” For our hearts to be filled with courage and confidence, we need to set our eyes on Christ, and him alone. It is only with him that we will be able to ride the storms of life. Amen.